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ABSTRACT

Most current major educational reforms call for extensive, meaningful teacher collaboration. Teachers who have worked together see substantial improvements in student achievement, behavior, and attitude. For teachers, collegiality breaks the isolation of the classroom and brings career rewards and daily satisfactions. Schools benefit for a number of reasons: teachers and administrators learn together; teachers are better prepared to support one another's strengths and accommodate weaknesses; schools become better prepared and organized to examine new ideas, methods, and materials; and teachers are organized to ease the strain of staff turnover. Generic barriers to teacher collaboration include norms of privacy and subject affiliation and departmental organization. More specific barriers stand between vocational and academic teachers--status differences, departmental walls, and physical separation. Teachers who work together realize that they are interdependent and need to dovetail instruction to ensure they are reinforcing one another's teaching. Support for vocational-academic teacher collegiality and collaboration has six dimensions: symbolic endorsements and rewards that place value on cooperative work, school-level organization of assignments and leadership, latitude given to teacher for influence on crucial matters of curriculum and instruction, time, training and assistance, and material support. (Twelve specific recommendations to encourage teacher collaboration are listed; 10 resources are cited.) (YLB)

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TEACHER COLLABORATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Introduction. Most of the current major educational reforms call for extensive, meaningful teacher collaboration. Two of the reforms—tech prep and the integration of vocational and academic education—attempt to dissolve the dichotomy between academic study and preparation for work; in these reforms, teacher collaboration is essential: Academic and vocational teachers are expected to work together to alter the curriculum and pedagogy within subjects, make connections between subjects, and explore new relationships between the school and the world of work.

By and large, however, teacher collaboration is a departure from existing norms, and, in most schools, teachers are colleagues in name only. They work out of sight and sound of one another, plan and prepare their lessons and materials alone, and struggle on their own to solve their instructional, curricular, and management problems.

Yet some schools foster substantial collegial relationships among teachers, and teacher collaboration produces significant benefits—for students, for the teachers, and for the school. Aside from the exceptional amount of teacher collegiality, there is nothing unique about these schools. Some are small, some are large, some are in rural areas, and some are urban, and they rely on ordinary budgets. The difference between these exceptional schools and the others appears to be organizational.

It is not clear from the research how the initial decision to collaborate is made. The general pressure to reform schools and the specific pressure of the Perkins Act, which focused on the integration of vocational and academic education, have created the environment for collaboration to take place.

The Benefits of Teacher Collaboration

Although the results are not uniformly good, teachers who have worked together see substantial improvements in student achievement, behavior, and attitude. Teachers in a junior high school traced their students' remarkable gains in math achievement and the virtual elimination of classroom behavior problems to the revisions in curriculum, testing, and placement procedures they had achieved working as a group. In schools where teachers work collaboratively, students can sense the program coherence and a consistency of expectations, which may explain the improved behavior and achievement.

For teachers, collegiality breaks the isolation of the classroom and brings career rewards and daily satisfactions. It avoids end-of-year burn-out and stimulates enthusiasm. "Instead of grasping for the single dramatic event or the special achievements of a few children as the main source of pride, teachers are more able to detect and celebrate a pattern of accomplishments within and across classrooms" (Little, 1987, p. 497). Over time, teachers who work closely together on matters of curriculum and instruction find themselves better equipped for classroom work. They take considerable satisfaction from professional relationships that withstand differences in viewpoints and occasional conflict.

Teacher collegiality avoids the sink-or-swim, trial-and-error mode that beginning teachers usually face. It brings experienced and beginning teachers closer together to reinforce the competence and confidence of the beginners.

The complexities introduced by a new curriculum or by the need to refine an existing curriculum are challenging. Teacher teamwork makes these complex tasks more manageable, stimulates new ideas, and promotes coherence in a school's curriculum and instruction. Together, teachers have the organizational skills and resources to attempt innovations that would exhaust the energy, skill, or resources of an individual teacher. "The conclusions that one draws from the experiences of closely orchestrated, task-oriented groups in schools are consistent with conclusions drawn from other studies of organization: The accomplishments of a proficient and well-organized group are widely considered to be greater than the accomplishments of isolated individuals" (Little, 1987, p. 496).

Thus, schools benefit from teacher collaboration in several ways:

- Through formal and informal training sessions, study groups, and conversations about teaching, teachers and administrators get the opportunity to "get smarter together."
- Teachers are better prepared to support one another's strengths and accommodate weaknesses. Working together, they reduce their individual planning time while greatly increasing the available pool of ideas and materials.
- Schools become better prepared and organized to examine new ideas, methods, and materials. The faculty becomes adaptable and self-reliant.
- Teachers are organized to ease the strain of staff turnover, both by providing systematic professional assistance to beginners and by explicitly socializing all newcomers, including veteran teachers, to staff values, traditions, and resources.

Barriers to Generic Collaboration

Nonetheless, teacher collaboration is rare. There are substantial barriers to teacher collaboration, and the barriers are of many kinds.

Norms of Privacy. A school faculty is an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals. Teachers see each other in odd moments before the school day begins, between periods, at lunch, and in occasional after-school meetings. (Some teachers remain in their classrooms the entire day, even at lunch.) More formally, they see one another during an assigned preparation period. The autonomy of the teacher is grounded in norms of privacy and non-interfer-

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ence. Most teachers feel that other teachers are "none of my business" and expect to supply advice to other teachers only when asked. So high a value is placed on autonomy that veteran teachers with strongly held and well-grounded views on effective teaching refrain from offering advice, except when asked, even to beginning teachers.

Subject Affiliation and Departmental Organization. Most secondary schools are organized by subject matter, and most teachers view themselves as subject matter specialists. The subject gives teachers a frame of reference, a professional identity, and a social community, all of which are reinforced by the teachers' preparation, state curriculum frameworks, standardized test protocols, textbook design, university admission requirements, and teacher licensing requirements.

Working within departments organized by subject, teachers affiliate with others in the same field in professional associations and informal networks. Inevitably, the privacy in which teachers work—the insularity of the classroom—sustains teachers' stereotypes regarding the nature and importance of subjects other than their own. Thus, the capacity of teachers to pursue new curricular and organizational forms is limited not only by their relative isolation from one another in the school day, but also by the insularity of subject and departmental boundaries. Given these barriers, teachers have scant basis, opportunity, or reason for meaningful collaboration with teachers in other departments.

Barriers Between Vocational and Academic Teachers

In addition to the generic barriers, a more specific set of barriers stands between vocational and academic teachers. In most comprehensive high schools, vocational and academic education are two separate worlds, and an "us versus them" mentality often prevails. In some ways, they are not even members of the same professional community; academic and vocational teachers are separated physically, socially, organizationally, and educationally. This is, of course, not true in all schools, but it is the norm, and it is a pervasive condition. Moreover, the separation is embedded in habitual ways of thought and action.

Status Differences. Academic disciplines have higher status, command greater institutional respect, and compete more successfully for resources. Vocational education and its teachers are on the social and educational periphery, not connected to the central purposes and priorities of the comprehensive schools in which they work. In practice, vocational education has become the schools' safety valve, absorbing students designated as "remedial" or "at risk."

The status differences between vocational and academic teachers are sustained by the value attached to the two different student bodies: The value placed on the preparation of the college-bound sets the standard, marginalizing the non-college-bound and their teachers and curricula. "Teachers who cultivated a craft because it held genuine appeal for them, and who entered teaching in the hope of finding students with similar inclinations, now find themselves viewed not as skilled craftspeople but as caretakers of marginal students" (Little, 1992, p. 29). Their students are viewed by almost everyone as "academically marginal," not as "work-oriented."

Departmental Walls. The formal organization of the school and the patterns of isolation or involvement that develop among colleagues reinforce the separation between vocational and academic teachers. Professional affiliations extend beyond the school walls, as teachers participate in activities defined by disciplinary interests. The departmentalization and subject-matter affiliations—and the walls they erect—are sustained not only by the dispositions of individuals but also by a range of policies and practices, including university admission requirements, that affect the way teachers think about curricula, the needs of students, pedagogy, and the purpose of education.

Physical Separation. The social and organizational isolation of most vocational teachers is exacerbated by the physical separation and programmatic fragmentation in secondary schools. The two worlds are not interdependent; that is, in the regular conduct of their daily work, they have no compelling reason to try to collaborate with one another. In addition, they have limited opportunity to collaborate even if they want to. Vocational facilities are often on the edges of a sprawling campus, or otherwise at a distance from academic classes. Often, there is no single space that is either large enough to hold the disparate teaching groups or congenial enough to attract them.

Teacher Collaboration: What Do They Do?

Despite the obstacles to collaboration between vocational and academic teachers, there are grounds for optimism: First, both groups of teachers share an orientation toward good work habits and related skills such as punctuality and ability to understand and follow directions. Second, both vocational and academic teachers aspire to cultivate students' capacities for complex reasoning and problem-solving. Further, the boundaries and divisions are fundamentally at odds with values central to public education, and it is a commitment to deeper values that enables some schools and their teachers to bridge subject and departmental boundaries.

Meaningful collaboration is taking place in some schools. The extent of the collaboration ranges from a basic stage, where schools simply attempt to improve the academic skills of vocational students by incorporating academic content into vocational courses, to the highest level, where occupational clusters wholly replace traditional academic and vocational departments.

The nature of cooperative efforts, that is, what teachers actually do, deepens and expands as the level of integration evolves. The relationships often begin with the two groups of teachers simply learning about one another, offering to help or asking for help, or providing in-service development activities for one another. At the next stage, vocational and academic teachers begin planning together and sharing information about their students and what they teach them. At more advanced stages, vocational and academic

teachers assist with one another's instruction, carefully dovetail instruction between courses, and, ultimately, coordinate instruction.

It takes time to overcome years of habit, thought, and organizational separation. The first efforts reveal the gulf between the two worlds. Some vocational teachers say that it is the first time they have even met some of the academic teachers in their school. Many vocational teachers feel inadequate to teach academic skills, and feel that this instruction should be the job of the academic teachers. Academic teachers feel that the vocational teachers do not appreciate the difficulty of teaching in academic settings. Boundary protection becomes prominent: Vocational teachers say, "The students need to know this before they get to us." Academic teachers say, "Don't tell me how to teach my subject."

But the process of working together enables the two faculties to understand one another better. When they begin to plan together, they begin to feel interdependent. These initial efforts lead the teachers to realize that they need to dovetail their instruction to ensure that they are reinforcing one another's teaching.

Teacher Collaboration: What Works?

Observers and interviewers have seen a wide range of cooperative activities in which both academic and vocational teachers are engaged. Considering all the barriers, what makes this possible? In short, what works?

Support for teacher collegiality and collaboration has six dimensions.

1. *Symbolic endorsements and rewards that place value on cooperative work*. The schools where teachers work together best are those in which the principal and other leaders convey their faith in the power of interdisciplinary teams to make the school better for students. Vague slogans in favor of collaboration are ineffective; the principal and other leaders must spell out in some detail what they think collaboration means.

2. *School-level organization of assignments and leadership*. School-level reorganization into teams stimulates cooperative work, but does not guarantee it. For such teams to be effective in encouraging cooperative work, leadership must be broadly distributed among teachers and administrators. For example, in some schools, teachers are given reduced teaching loads in exchange for leading curriculum development work.

3. *Latitude given to teachers for influence on crucial matters of curriculum and instruction*. Teachers' investment in team planning appears to rest heavily on the latitude they have to make decisions in crucial areas of curriculum, materials selection, student assignments, instructional grouping, and the assessment of student progress. Teaming for the sake of teaming leads to disillusionment; teaming must be about matters of compelling importance.

4. *Time*. Common planning periods, regularly scheduled team or subject-area meetings, and released time for collaborative work all support cooperative work among teachers. The opportunities for collaborative work are either enhanced or eroded by the master schedule.

5. *Training and assistance*. Since it is a radical departure from the usual, cooperative work places unfamiliar and pressing demands on teachers. Teacher work groups succeed in part by mastering specific skills and by developing explicit agreements to govern their work together. Task-related training and assistance bolsters the confidence of teachers to work with one another outside the classroom.

6. *Material support*. The quality and availability of reference texts and other materials, adequate copying equipment, consultants on selected problems, and other forms of human and material support appear to be crucial contributors to teachers' ability and willingness to work together successfully.

Specific Recommendations. Aside from the broad principles laid out above, researchers and practitioners have noted concrete steps that can encourage teacher collaboration. The strategies listed below have been used to achieve the integration of vocational and academic education at three Southern Region Education Board/Vocational Education Consortium pilot sites. (One is a comprehensive high school, the other two are vocational centers serving four high schools.)

- Involve both vocational and academic teachers in the development of integration goals and objectives.
- Publicize to students, parents, and community the purposes and anticipated outcomes of the collaborative efforts of the teachers.
- Provide for staff development that is free from the distractions of the day-to-day routine of school operations and involves all academic and vocational teachers.
- Provide open, unstructured time in a relaxed atmosphere for vocational and academic teachers to share.
- Move classroom locations of both vocational and academic teachers so that they will have more ready access to one another.
- Have vocational teachers share work completed by students with academic teachers so that the academic teachers can determine what skills are used in vocational classes.
- Have vocational and academic teachers share competency lists so they can learn the basic competencies the others teach or need students to know.
- Provide time for vocational and academic teachers to observe and experience hands-on activities in each others' classes.
- Provide adequate planning time for academic teachers to incorporate real-world examples in their instruction. This planning time should be shared with vocational teachers.
- Have vocational and academic teachers work in pairs to assure that students are being taught comparable applications of basic skills. This has the additional benefit that students can no longer say that "the other teacher does not make us do this."
- Administrators need to set the stage, but teachers need to determine the "how to" of these collaborative efforts.
- When vocational and academic teachers share information, small

groups of two to six teachers are better than larger groups. When larger groups meet, sharing of ideas and planning becomes limited.

Teachers have commented that after working cooperatively they no longer perceived of themselves as "us and them," and that they gained respect for what the others were teaching and the problems they had in teaching. Academic teachers enjoyed seeing the practical applications of their instruction. Vocational and academic teachers found that they could reinforce one another's assignments and often gave joint assignments.

Summary and Conclusion

Serious collaboration—teachers engaging in the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning—is rare, and where it exists, it is fragile. Yet it can and does occur, and the enthusiasm of teachers about their collaborations is persuasive. When schools are organized to support it, the advantages of collegial action are varied and substantial. When teachers work as colleagues, it produces greater coherence and integration to the daily work of teaching. Further, it equips individual teachers, groups of teachers, and their schools for steady improvement. In short, it helps to organize the school as an environment for learning to teach.

Two fundamental conditions appear to be crucial to joint action among teachers: interdependence and opportunity. The key practices of colleagues are most likely to make a difference where they are an integral, inescapable part of day-to-day work. Teachers' main motivation and reward for involvement with one another will be found in the work of teaching. To the extent they find themselves truly interdependent with one another to manage and reap the rewards of teaching, joint work will be worth the investment of time and other resources. To the extent that teachers' success and satisfaction can be achieved independently, the motivation to collaborate is weakened.

And joint action cannot occur where it is impossible or prohibitively costly in organizational, political, or personal terms. Schedules, staff assignments, and access to resources must be made conducive to shared work. If teachers are to work often and fruitfully as colleagues, school policy must solidly support it. The value that is placed on shared work must be both said and demonstrated. The opportunity for it must be prominent in the schedule. The purpose for it must be compelling and the task sufficiently challenging. The material resources and human assistance must be adequate. And the accomplishments of individuals and groups must be recognized and celebrated.

—Morton Inger

This synthesis is drawn from the following publications:

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